



# Washington Rural Health Association

November 14, 2005

The Honorable Mike Johanns  
Secretary of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Avenue, SW  
Washington, DC 20250-3355

Dear Secretary Johanns:

Thank you for holding an open public forum in Cheney, Washington this month. The focus of the crowd was on commodities and production, but the USDA has much broader responsibilities that greatly impact our agricultural economy. This letter is in response to your request for comment on the 2007 Farm Bill. I am writing on behalf of the Washington Rural Health Association, a statewide organization composed of a large number of representatives from the health, social services, and behavioral health fields. Our comments will focus on this aspect of the new Farm Bill.

The request for public comment raises the question of whether more Government attention should be focused on investing in the infrastructure in rural America. Agricultural communities rely on the health care infrastructure in order to remain productive down on the farm. Rural communities without a strong healthcare infrastructure cannot attract new industry or new residents. Efficiency and effectiveness in healthcare rely on access to current technologies as well as capital for investment in replacement facilities.

First, on the subject of new technologies. As you know President Bush has forwarded a bold agenda for implementing a health information technology infrastructure throughout the country in the next few years. Rural and very remote communities do not have access to low-cost broadband services that can help them to compete in today's economic markets. There are insufficient resources to support all those communities that need support to purchase broadband access. Rural Utilities Services (RUS) funding has been an important resource, but is insufficient to meet the country's needs.

We recommend that the 2007 Farm bill be modified to include capacity to support the expansion of rural resources to support broadband access. High speed connectivity is critical not only for conducting business in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but for expanding access to health care in rural hospitals, clinics, and private health practitioner offices. If the health information technology initiative is to succeed, and if small businesses and rural health services are to have equal access to the benefits of HIT (e.g., electronic health records for employees, patients, medical staffs), then broadband services must be expanded throughout the nation.

Second, on the subject of capital investment. Our rural hospitals, many built with Hill-Burton funding in the early 1970's, are at an age where major reinvestment or replacement must be considered. The dollars necessary for these expensive reinvestments are not available in the local agricultural economy. USDA loan programs need to be tailored to this need. The success of the Critical Access hospital program in addressing serious operational budget crises must be matched with programs recognizing the growing back log of unfunded maintenance and replacement needs. A strong healthcare infrastructure is necessary as we care for our growing population of retirees and keep rural communities attractive to growing families and businesses.

We believe the 2007 Farm bill is critical to achieving our mutual goal of healthy rural communities and a healthy agricultural economy, and seek your support for the investment.

Sincerely,

*Kathy L. McVay*  
Kathy McVay, President



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